

Beyond Media Images

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Y S Rajasekhara Reddy, the new chief minister has given the impression of being a man who cares for the classes neglected by Chandrababu Naidu's model of development. Whether that is really so, is extremely doubtful. That those classes have reposed trust in the Congress Party under his leadership is clear: the issues of irrigation and employment appear to have contributed to the defeat of the Telugu Desam Party, augmented by the desire for a separate state in the Telangana region. Having realised his debt to the dissatisfaction, the new chief minister has already promised heavy investment in major irrigation projects and free power to farmers. And as for Telangana, YSR has made no secret of the fact that he has neither any understanding of the cause nor any sympathy for it.

Chandrababu Naidu's defeat is the kind of event that lends itself so well to analysis by hindsight that the effort would be too tiresome. In any case, analysts attached to the Left parties have done that as ably as hindsight alone permits, and there is no need to add to their wisdom (by which it is not intended that they are altogether wrong). In fact, Naidu (or 'Babu' as he is known to his admirers in the state) is a classic instance of a phenomenon that the west is probably already very familiar with, but we are only just waking up to: a pervasive media creates a celebrity out of almost nothing, and then calls in experts to explain why its creation turned out to be nothing. Chandrababu is merely an ambitious political schemer who has managed to con quite a lot of intelligent people because he knows that their hunger for the image he has put on — a third world politician in the mould of a corporate executive spewing IT jargon and the verbiage of the World Bank's development policy prejudices — is too acute for the normal functioning of their other senses.

This is an effort, in part, to introduce his successor. For if someone does not do so now, a new myth could soon be in the making, and if the analysts of Left parties participate in its creation, as a homage to coalition politics, one may have to spend a lot of time disabusing the public of it. It is so easy to clothe Y S Rajasekhara Reddy — MBBS with the image of the good doctor who has turned to politics to cure society — that even without the help of such expertise, the media may itself involuntarily do so.

Reforms with a human face, which appears to be the current slogan of the Congress, suits the image so well.

The man is anything but a vendor of humane visages. His rise in politics has been accompanied by more bloodshed than that of any other politician in this state. Not bloodshed for some avowed 'higher cause', but bloodshed for the narrowest possible cause: the rise of one individual to political power and prominence. The recent elections may very well have meant many things in terms of popular aspirations, and one has no desire to be cynical on that score. But in the matter of the change of helmsmen, it has merely replaced a man who would find nothing too crooked if it is in his political interest, with one who would find nothing too brutal. And for both, the goal is the same — Power. Such precisely are the men neo-liberalism wishes to find in power in countries such as ours which it wants to subordinate to its logic and interests. It would be imprudent to regard this as an irrelevant consideration on the ground of the Congress Party's avowal of a 'human face', for firstly that expression has no precise meaning, secondly Congressmen are known to be capable of changing course mid-stream, and thirdly India's rulers irrespective of party have knowingly put themselves in a position where they have little leeway in matters of policy.

YSR (as he is known in short) belongs to Cuddapah district of the Rayalaseema region of the state. His constituency, Pulivendula, exhibits a most distressing topography: endless stretches of nude soil studded with gravel and relieved by rocks that are even more bare. It is watered, using the expression figuratively, by the Chitravati, a tributary of the Penna (called Pennair in most maps), itself hardly a river worth the name. Today YSR wishes to be seen as a politician who has responded to the needs of farmers and is determined to do well by them, but in the nearly three decades of his political life, he has not been instrumental in adding one acre of assured irrigation to the parched lands of the constituency that has again and again returned him or his brother (when YSR chose to go to parliament instead) to the state assembly.

His father Raja Reddy was, to begin with, an ordinary farmer and a small time civil contractor. He got converted to Christianity in the days when even upper castes thought there may be material benefit in doing so, and was ostracised by the Reddys of his native village, Balapanur. He shifted to Pulivendula, the *tahsil* headquarters. He quickly made a name for himself as a rough and violent man with whom one had better not get into a quarrel. To understand how Raja Reddy took advantage of that and paved the way for his son's rise in politics, one must know something about Rayalaseema.

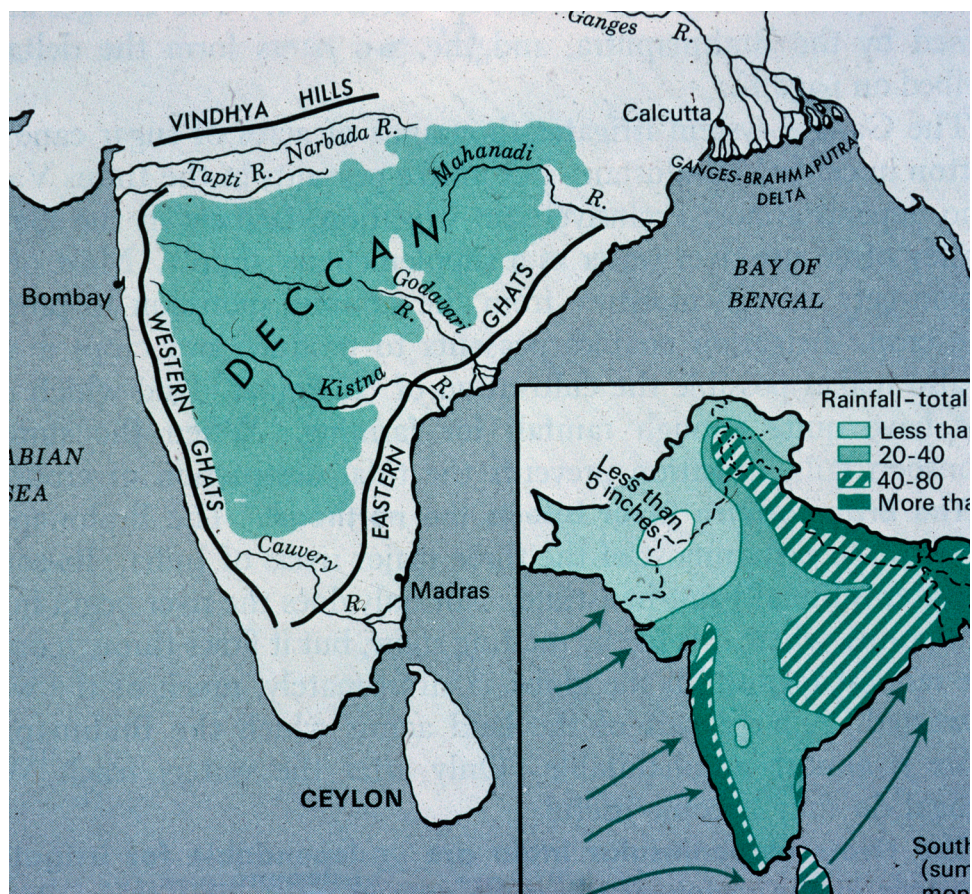
Viewing Rayalaseema

The Rayalaseema districts of Andhra Pradesh are known for severe water-scarcity. Though as a matter of convention the four districts of Anantapur, Cuddapah, Kurnool and Chittoor are said to comprise the region, in physical, social and historical terms, only the Madanapalle division of Chittoor district can be talked of in the company of the other three. The rest of Chittoor is in every sense, including average rainfall precipitation, a distinct entity. The other three districts have an average annual rainfall of 618 mm, which is among the lowest in the country. They lie in the basins of the Tungabhadra and Penna rivers, which popular memory associates with bounteous waters once upon a time, but are today mere apologies of streams. The catchment of these rivers gives only a moderate yield, much of which has already been dammed, rendering the river-beds dry along most of the length of the rivers. But the canals from the dams serve only about 4 per cent of the cultivable land in the districts.

The major irrigation source of Rayalaseema, however, used to be the excellent system of tanks constructed by the *Rayas* of Vijayanagar, from whom the region gets its name. Like the rulers of Hyderabad and Warangal to the north, the *Rayas* of Vijayanagar got constructed a system of tanks all over the region to husband the scarce water resources and channel them to the fields. Indeed, most of the kings who ruled the various parts of the *Deccan*, and not merely the Telugu country, built such tanks to provide water for drinking and irrigation to the populace. A characteristic of the irrigation tanks of Rayalaseema is their huge size, probably because rainfall there is even more scarce, and demands even more comprehensive husbanding of water than elsewhere in the *Deccan*.

This tank system, as indeed everywhere in the *Deccan*, is however in a shambles, now. Almost nothing has been done for their upkeep during the last several decades. Because of the denudation of the land around, even the slightest rainfall causes inrush of water into the tanks, breaching the poorly maintained bund. The breaches merit only the most cosmetic of repairs, and as a result, the tank bunds are but bundles of ill-repaired breaches. For the same reason, all the tanks are heavily silted, so heavily indeed that they look more like irregular-shaped football fields than irrigation tanks. In the days before chemical fertilisers, the silt was prized by farmers as a source of fertile topsoil, but now nobody is interested in taking the silt to fertilise their fields, and so de-silting, if it is to be done comprehensively, would be akin to a mass waste-removal exercise. As such, it is too costly for the funds governments are willing to spare for the upkeep of traditional irrigation systems.

The upshot is reliance on increasing use of groundwater, through deeper and deeper borewells. But this is a self-destructive game, for the deeper farmers dig wells



Deccan Area

in competition with each other, the deeper they will have to dig next time round. The scarce rainfall cannot sustain this technology-driven thirst for groundwater. In 2002, in the midst of the second successive year of drought, a middle class farmer of YSR's Cuddapah district had dug a borewell 1,000 feet deep, and still did not find water. ("If only I had persevered a little more, I may have struck oil" was, however, the farmer's only response to commiseration, for a sense of humour rarely forsakes farmers, even in the worst of adversities).

Violence-Prone Society

A harsh physical environment does not necessarily lead to a harsh social life — there is no such homology — but the peculiar history of Rayalaseema combined with the region's scanty endowment has led to a violence-ridden society. The kingdom of the *Rayas* was characterised by devolution of the power of administration, more particularly that of 'law and order', down to the lowest level. This was even more true of the border areas which were administered by men whom the British Gazetteers called *Polegars* ('*palegadu*' in Telugu and '*palayakkaran*' in Tamil). They (often) had small forts, and an armed retinue of men, with whose help they maintained order and assisted the collection of revenue. Except in the most well-administered periods, these men were not bound by any known rules of conduct, not to speak of anything resembling law. They behaved like — and in fact were — war-lords. With the fall of the Vijayanagar empire most of them became sovereigns over a handful of villages and incessantly raided neighbouring domains for booty and territory. It is said — though there is no hard evidence in this regard — that the villagers caught in this conflict sought refuge with village strongmen who could gather a retinue behind them and play the role of protector. But of course, when they did so, the villagers had to pay for the protection by living in accordance with the protector's writ.

As the fall of the Vijayanagar empire was followed by conflict between the British Indian rulers and the rulers of Hyderabad and Mysore, much of which took place over the Rayalaseema districts, the warlords as well as any villager who could gather an armed group around him carried a double premium: the battling armies wooed them, and the local people too needed their help to protect them against the marauding soldiers from outside the region. At the end, by the time the British brought the entire region into their control by the beginning of the 19th century, there was left this residue of a social practice: men of the dominant sections would gather an armed gang around them to assert their power, enforce their writ in the village and fight off challengers to their power over society. While the *Polegars* were mostly of non-

cultivating communities such as *Boya* and *Patra*, the practice of establishing dominance and exercising power through the force of armed gangs became a characteristic feature of powerful landed communities, generically described as *Kapu* (husbandsman) but mainly of the *Reddy* caste in recent decades. The British, who successfully put an end to the *Polegars* by a carrot-and-stick policy, found to their dismay that this residue continued to disturb their notion of *rule of law*. They christened these gangs '*village factions*', a name that continues to be used to this day.

The typical *village faction* was that of the village headman, called *Reddy* in Rayalaseema. That appellation today refers to a dominant caste which is present all over the state, and men of the caste tag on *Reddy* behind their names. But that is a phenomenon of recent decades, more particularly the latter three-quarters of the 20th century. The word has a complex history, one moment of which is that it designated the village headman in the Rayalaseema districts, in the days when village administration was presided over by the institution of hereditary headmen. This *Reddy* would protect his primacy in the affairs of the village with the most aggressive zealotry. Any challenger to his importance would have to contend with a violent response from him. Though we spoke above of a retinue maintained by such strongmen, it was not a permanent gang maintained only for fighting. Most of the retinue would be ordinary farmers or labourers who come to the aid of the *Reddy* when called upon to do so. They would, it goes without saying, benefit in matters where the *Reddy* had the final say, but passionate loyalty of the *Reddy*'s followers is a characteristic of *village factions*. Their attachment was never merely a matter of rational calculation.

The dominance of the *Reddy* would often be challenged by someone in the village. He would invariably be either a big landowner, or an otherwise powerful man, e.g., by virtue of his closeness to the ruler of the area. From about the time that the word *Reddy* started signifying a caste and not just hereditary headmanship, it is seen that in most cases, the challenger is also a *Reddy* by caste, though there have been important exceptions, especially where the militant *Boya* community is numerous. That man would gather a group of villagers behind him and fight the group of the '*Reddy*'. The people to gather behind him would include, of course, his kith and kin, his tenants and sharecroppers; it would include persons who have suffered at the hands of the '*Reddy*'; it would also include persons who have conflicts of interest or ego with the followers of the '*Reddy*'; it would even include people who are obliged to the challenger for their day-to-day life or livelihood, even to the extent of people who, by virtue of the village topography, have to pass by his house or fields to reach their own house or fields.

Once such a challenger emerges, or in the course of his emergence, street fights between the two groups break out at every conceivable instance. The slightest material interest of every member of the group has to be protected or realised by force, and the

slightest injury to every ego has to be avenged by force. But everything turns around the primary interest: the leader's pre-eminence in the village, his honour, his writ, his word. For this, lives are sacrificed in a spiral of killings. Every death has to be avenged with a death, every burnt house or haystack with a burnt house or haystack, and every devastated acre of land with a devastated acre. The implements of fighting in the old days were stones, sticks, and every implement made by the human race for taming nature and making it yield fruit. It was after the 1950s that crude explosives, crude firearms and lately more sophisticated weapons entered *village factions*. It is an interesting aside that at each stage it was the communists that were — in all innocence — responsible for modernising the weaponry of *faction fights*.

The village *factionist* of yore, as can be imagined, was hardly an epitome of rationality. By the time he was through with his energies he would also be through with much of the property he had: it costs a lot to fight court cases, look after injured followers, repair burnt down dwellings and replace hacked orchards, all to keep his manly pride and moustaches intact. But after the introduction of *panchayat raj* democracy and rural development works, the brutality of *village factions* acquired the sheen of instrumental rationality. It was quickly realised by the *village factionists* that the methods used by them to protect the elusive social prominence or importance, could be put to more practical use for rigging polls and winning *panchayat* elections at the village or block level, and monopolising road and other public works contracts in the village. This started earnestly in the 1960s.

The next and natural step was for a leader to emerge from among the *village factionists* of an area or from a town nearby, who would gather support of all the powerful *factionists* of the area, create *factionists* to fight the recalcitrant, assist the faithful in defeating their rivals, protect their crimes and make it worth their while to indulge in crimes of violence on his account in addition to theirs, and make that the base of his rise in politics at the district level and beyond, and the guarantee of a monopoly of not small or local public works but substantial civil contracts. It took a new generation of men to see this possibility and realise it. YSR was one of the pioneers of this change, which has terrorised and devastated the social and political life of the Rayalaseema districts.

Communists as Catalysts

The communists played a peculiar catalyst's role in all this. The undivided *Communist Party of India (CPI)* had some base in the Rayalaseema districts. Its leader Eswara Reddy was elected MP from Cuddapah on four occasions starting with the first parlia-

ment. It fought — or sought to fight — feudal domination in the villages, but had to contend with the culture of *village factions*. The communists — from that day to this — have unfortunately understood *factionism* as merely a rather violent form of feudal domination, which may only require a more violent response, and nothing more. That *village factions* divide all classes in the village vertically, from absentee landlords to the poorest labourers, which vertical division is accompanied by a degree of felt loyalty to the factionist at the top, thereby reproducing the animosity at the top all the way down the line, and that such a state of affairs is seen as the natural ordering of society by all classes, has never been adequately understood by them.

And so when the communists found it difficult to organise the masses to fight a feudal landlord, they encouraged and supported any upstart who was willing to challenge the landlord's dominance. All that they achieved was to create a new factionist, who would discard the communists once his purpose was done. Pulivendula was dominated in the early years after independence by Devireddy Nagi Reddy (known as D N Reddy), a somewhat haughty landlord, mill owner, some time *zilla parishad* chairman, and some time MP. YSR's father Raja Reddy was willing to take on D N Reddy, and the *CPI* assisted him by helping him to win the block level *panchayat* elections. Today, the *CPI* has all but left the district, but Raja Reddy's legacy continues in the form of his powerful son.

Raja Reddy established his credentials as a man to fear by an incident that people still talk of, nearly 50 years later. The town of Pulivendula has a sizable colony of *Erukalas*, a *scheduled tribe*, some of whom were known for their unruly ways. They were despised but feared by the higher castes, though it is rumoured that D N Reddy was not above using their crimes for his ends. One day one of them, Oosanna, tried to steal the ornaments worn by a woman of the *Reddy* caste in the *bazaar*. When the woman struggled, that man cleverly exclaimed that she was his wife and was being disobedient. By the time people realised he was telling a lie, he had slipped away. Later in the day, Raja Reddy reportedly caught hold of Oosanna, dragged him to a public place, poured kerosene on him and burnt him alive. This incident made Raja Reddy a feared man, and people became willing to gather behind him in his conflicts with established leaders. By and by he established immense dominance in the area.

But he lacked money of the kind that would sustain his further rise in politics. This problem was resolved by a combination of chance and brutality just about the time that YSR entered politics. Cuddapah has deposits of the mineral barytes, which was once upon a time not a highly priced mineral. One of the mining leases was held by Venkatasubbaiah of the *Baliya* caste. Raja Reddy joined him as a junior partner/supervisor (it is not clear which), reportedly because Venkatasubbaiah believed he would be useful in controlling the workmen. Round about the mid-1970s, however,

it was discovered that barytes has use in petroleum refining, and its price shot up. Raja Reddy wanted Venkatasubbaiah to hand over the mining lease to him and go. A prominent *CPI* leader and writer, Gajjela Malla Reddy, brokered a deal whereby Venkatasubbaiah would take Rs 11 lakh and leave the mining lease to Raja Reddy. Venkatasubbaiah refused, and was killed. The mining lease, passed into YSR's hands.

For many years in the later half of the 1980s and the early half of the 1990s, YSR's barytes mining operation was the subject of one scandal after another. Lease — or sub-lease, after barytes mining became formally the monopoly of the *A P Mineral Development Corporation*, only to be subleased to the same previous lessees — would be taken for a certain extent, but many times more land around would be mined. Even a piece of land on which stood a protected monument so notified by the *Archaeological Survey of India* was mined, and one and a half lakh tonnes of the mineral (priced at Rs 600 per tonne) was taken away by the time the government woke up and put a stop to it. And there was the case of a villager, Vivekanandam, whose private land of 1.8 acres was also sub-leased to YSR by the Corporation. Though that man went to court and obtained an injunction against the sub-lease, YSR continued with the mining and took away mineral worth Rs 5 crore. The maternal uncle of the said Vivekanandam, a retired government employee, Rajagopal, set out to Hyderabad, to express his protest to the then chief minister Janardhan Reddy, and to move the high court again. The old man was set upon by a gang in the middle of the state's capital, and had his hands and legs broken. This was as recently as 1992.

With the money flowing from the barytes mines in his pockets, YSR was in a position to undertake the transformation of 'village factions' into full-fledged instruments of political and economic domination at the highest level. There were others of his period — the post-emergency breed of educated, intelligent and utterly cynical politicians — who made money from other sources, such as for instance excise contracts, and used that wealth in the same manner as YSR to rise to prominence in Rayalaseema politics. The money was used to buy the support of *village factionists*. The *factionist* would be helped to overcome his rivals and establish unchallenged power over his area of operation. If a *factionist* was too adamant and did not heed the call, a rival would be funded to rise against him. A lot of lives would of course be lost in the process, but then that was, for these gentlemen, a matter of no moment. Once a sufficient monopoly of control over the local *factionists* was established, the leader's political-economic future was ensured. Elections would be concluded in his favour, and his muscle-power would ensure that he monopolised all the civil/excise contracts he coveted. This sounds bland when stated in this fashion, but the process involved tremendous amount of violence and inaugurated a veritable regime of terror in the area.

Manipulation of Election Process

Political parties and programmes have meant nothing in Rayalaseema, more particularly Cuddapah district. The only distinction in that district has been: with YSR and against YSR. Those who are with him can be in his party or in any other party — not excluding the *CPI* — and similarly those who are against him. On more than one occasion he has exhibited his capacity to ensure that a candidate to the assembly from his own party who has got a ticket against his will is defeated by a candidate of his choice contesting on a *Telugu Desam* ticket. Elections in Rayalaseema have meant open violence on polling day to scare away voters and leave the field open to bogus voting, taking away the ballot box to stuff it with ballot papers stamped elsewhere, preventing voters of the rival candidate from entering the polling station, forcing voters to show the stamped ballot paper to the local *factionist's* man before putting it in the box, and other acts of like nature.

Until recently, a rule followed by the Election Commission was that in the event of death of any candidate, the election would be postponed. Killing defenceless candidates to get the poll postponed is a method not unknown in the more violent parts of our country. Rayalaseema is no exception. In the assembly polls of 1989, YSR's follower Nagi Reddy fought the *Telugu Desam's* Palakondarayudu at Raychoti in Cuddapah district. In the parliament polls of 1985, Palakondarayudu, who was then a candidate for parliament, was unsure of the support of the two main local factions that ruled Raychoti town. So he is said to have got an independent candidate, Guvvala Subbarayudu killed and got the election postponed. He thus gained time to rope in the two factions, and succeeded in winning the election held later. In 1989, polls were held simultaneously for assembly and parliament. Palakondarayudu was this time a candidate for the assembly. Apprehensive that he may repeat his victorious performance, YSR's man Nagi Reddy set up a pliant man of their own *faction*, Avula Subba Reddy by name, as an independent candidate, and allegedly killed him the day before the election to get the election to the assembly postponed. It is inconceivable that this could have happened without the knowledge and consent of YSR. In the parliament poll that took place that day as scheduled, there was an orgy of violence in which five persons were killed in Raychoti town including a polling officer by name Ahmedullah. The polling officer was dragged out of the polling station and murdered. The Congress candidate was elected to parliament. The terror created by YSR's group on that day was sufficient for his candidate Nagi Reddy to carry the day when the assembly poll for the postponed Raychoti segment was later held.

Parallel with establishing themselves in power by such means, these leaders set themselves up as representatives of the region who would fight the rulers of the state

for justice to water-scarce Rayalaseema. It has been the tragedy of Rayalaseema that, unlike Telangana for instance which has a vibrant political climate that throws up activists close to the people, the same leaders who have devastated the region's social and political life with their strategies of gang warfare have time and again doubled as saviours of the people. But as their interest is merely the furtherance of their political careers, such espousal is short-lived and fruitless.

For about three to four years in the early part of the 1980s, these leaders led major agitations for irrigation water to the region. They held lengthy '*padayatras*' and boisterous protest meetings. YSR was among those in the forefront. But their interest tapered off once they succeeded in putting pressure upon N T Rama Rao to sanction the extension of the *Telugu Ganga* project to provide irrigation water to parts of Cuddapah district. Later, the Congress came to power in the state, and many of the agitators became ministers, but they did precious little for the irrigation needs they had agitated for. Subsequently the *Telugu Desam Party* came back to power again, but this time YSR took care not to be seen agitating for the rights of one region. He had aimed his sights higher. He would dislodge Chandrababu and become chief minister of the state. Power, and power alone has been his guiding light, at each stage of his career, much like Chandrababu. Given the peculiar nature of Rayalaseema society, brute force served YSR's purpose in the initial stages, much as unscrupulous manipulation did in Chandrababu's case. But once he set his sights on Hyderabad, he knew that other methods would have to be tried out, and he has been game for that.

He worked quite systematically towards this end and has succeeded. In the process he has given the impression of being a man who cares for the classes neglected by Chandrababu's model of development. Whether that is really so is, to put it politely, extremely doubtful. That those classes have reposed trust in the Congress Party under his leadership is clear: all analysis as well as impressionistic views point to the issues of irrigation and employment as central to the defeat of the *Telugu Desam Party*, augmented by the desire for a separate state in the Telangana region. Economists too are agreed that poor growth of employment opportunities, and poor capital formation in agriculture, the latter mainly because of low public investment, are two among the negative characteristics of the Indian economy's performance in recent years. Too categorical an analysis of voters' preferences is a risky business, but it appears reasonable to suppose that the dissatisfaction generated by these factors lies behind the victory of the Congress. YSR realised it in the course of his pre-election *padayatra* which brought him face to face with much dissatisfaction regarding issues on which — barring free power to farmers — he had never taken any stand till then. Having realised his debt to the dissatisfaction, he has already gone on record promising heavy investment in major irrigation projects, and free power to farmers, which will encourage private

investment to the same end. If he has not issued any immediate policy statements in the matter of employment, that will be declared to be understandable because it is by no means an easy matter. And as for Telangana, YSR has made no secret of the fact that he has neither any understanding of nor sympathy for that cause.

But it is doubtful that he has any real convictions in regard to the first two issues too, other than the realisation that they have been useful instruments in his ascension to power. If freedom to all prisoners were to serve that purpose, he would equally readily have emptied all the state's jails, without holding any philosophy of punishment commensurate with the act. These may appear to be points not worth labouring at length, and it may even be cleverly said, as the Hindi saying goes, that we are concerned that the fruit be a mango, and not that the tree be a mango tree.

But if correcting economic policy distortions is what the aspirations revealed by the elections are about, we must note that change in irrigation policy from Chandrababu's exclusive espousal of drip irrigation to a more realistic programme is not sufficient by itself. Such change is not by itself inimical to the ruling policies being prescribed in the name of reforms. The whole gamut of the policies concerning resources, opportunities and governmental responsibilities will have to be addressed, even if they have not been voted about in bringing YSR to power. There is little evidence that YSR is committed to a different view of these matters than Chandrababu, or that he is willing to devise ways of standing up to the pressure that the World Bank and other instrumentalities of neo-liberalism have been exerting in these matters. Much of what he is now heard saying against Chandra babu's brand of neo-liberal economic philosophy he picked up in the run up to the elections, and was never part of his way of looking at the economy.

It is also to be noted that the forces distorting India's economy to serve a variety of external interests inimical to those of the poor and needy, have not been content with prescribing any transparent economic policy imperatives at all to suit their ends. They have indulged in a number of devious measures behind the backs of the people, with the active connivance of the rulers. Chandrababu was a willing collaborator in this, and YSR is not proof against it. The economic philosophy ruling the world, namely that resources, opportunities and governmental assistance of all kinds are optimally distributed when they are put unreservedly at the service of those who can augment them with the most investment and generate from them the most income, is easily understood when it is plainly stated, and easily dissented from if one has the slightest conviction that progress should be everybody's progress, not at some unspecified date in the future, but with reasonable immediacy. But that policy prescription has not been content with such transparent debates. It has sought to work itself into our polity by opaque devices and has succeeded wherever it has found local collaborators among those in power. Those who believe that YSR will resist where Chandrababu

was willing are fooling themselves.